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Environmental Protection and Spiritual Environmental Protection

A talk given by Master Sheng-yen on April 26, 1992, translated by Lin Yu and edited by Linda Peer and Harry Miller

"Environmental protection" has become a household term, but what should it mean in the context of Ch'an? To protect the environment is to safeguard the natural, ecological balance of our world. When this balance is impaired, natural disasters and human suffering result. We are part of, and dependent on, the ecological balance.

The earth sustains us, but we do daily damage to soil, air and water by our use of chemicals, synthetics, radioactive materials, energy and so on. The newspapers, cardboard boxes, paper cups and towels we use every day are often made by destroying the earth's forests, and they produce mountains of garbage. While we take care of our personal hygiene and cleanliness, we pollute the environment. Safeguarding the cleanliness of our surroundings is an example of environmental protection.

The killing of animals for food has become a major cause of environmental destruction. Our methods of raising chickens, ducks, pigs, cattle and other food animals damage the land and pollute the water in many places. For instance, Americans and Japanese destroy rain forests in the Amazon Basin in South America to raise beef cattle to ship to Japan and the United States. They don't harm their local environments. Instead they harm the natural resources and the ecological balance of poorer countries, and of the earth as a whole. Non-killing is one of the Buddhist precepts. The non-killing of animals for meat is also a method of environmental protection.

When people try to improve their lives they generally think in material terms, and neglect the spiritual. This is the main reason for environmental destruction. As Ch'an practitioners our material lives should be simple and orderly, and it should be our spiritual lives which are most important to us. Through Ch'an practice the quality of our lives can be improved in the spiritual sense, and Ch'an concepts and practices can be used to help protect the environment for all sentient beings and to improve the well-being of mankind.

Recently I directed a week long Ch'an retreat in England. Participants included psychologists, psychiatrists, medical doctors, and writers: intelligent people who help other people with their problems. But they, too, have problems and suffer, and so they were attending a Ch'an retreat. We live in a rapidly changing and violently competitive world, which is also polluted everywhere. That causes stress and makes equanimity and peace almost impossible. How can we foster equanimity and peace? Through Ch'an concepts and methods of practice.

But what is Ch'an? Ch'an is pure wisdom, Ch'an is uncontaminated mind and Ch'an is the mental state of formlessness, non-abiding and no-thought.

Ch'an is pure wisdom. Wisdom is to see clearly without any self-attachment. People with attachment and ego may be clever at being selfish, but they are not wise in the Ch'an sense.

Ch'an is uncontaminated mind. Uncontaminated mind is non-discriminating, unemotional and, again, without self-attachment.

Ch'an is a mental state of formlessness, non-abiding and no-thought. These three terms are used in the *Platform Sutra* of the Sixth Patriarch of Ch'an, Hui-neng (638-713), and this concept is basic to the Sutra.

Formlessness is emptiness. This is the emptiness in "Existence is emptiness" or "Form is emptiness," as it is expressed in the *Heart Sutra*: if you have something, you do not have it at the same time, because it is changing at every moment. Seeing the essence of emptiness embodied in visible forms is called formlessness. Like the flowers on the altar in the temple, everything has existence and emptiness at the same time. Existence is the form of the flowers. But since they are ever-changing, they are empty. An ever-changing form is formless. What exists now is vanishing. What has just existed is gone now. "Form is emptiness."

Ch'an is also a mental state of non-abiding, and non-abiding is also emptiness. That is to say, "Emptiness is existence," or, as *The Heart Sutra* says, "Emptiness is form." A mind which is non-abiding does not hold, stop or stay on any form or phenomenon, including physical forms but also ideas, feelings and so on. The non-abiding mind recognizes that form is forever changing and that nothing can be stopped, or attached to. It recognizes the emptiness of all forms. Even the desire to hold on to something, which is a form, is ever-changing and empty. That is what *The Heart Sutra* means when it says, "Emptiness is form."

Ch'an is a mental state of no-thought, and no-thought is, again, emptiness. No-thought means no self-attached thinking in mind, no vexations in

thought, and no selfishness in thinking. That is emptiness: the emptiness of the ever-changing self. A mind with no self-attachment experiences no emotional or sentimental vicissitudes. Selfness is also selflessness.

Buddhism proclaims selflessness. Once I was asked, "Does Buddha have selfness (ego)? Does an Arhat have selfness?"

I answered, "Certainly not. The Buddha and arhats have no vexations. It is only when you are free of selfness that you are released from vexations."

Somebody further asked, "The first sentence in *The Diamond Sutra* is, 'Thus I have heard,' spoken by Ananda, and a verse in it, spoken by the Buddha, has the following lines:

*Coming to me in form
Praying to me in voice
Is a way of vileness and evil
Never leading to Buddha*

The "I" and "me" in these statements were said by the enlightened arhat Ananda and the Buddha himself. How can it be said that they have no selfness?"

I answered, "The 'I' and 'me' are, themselves, selflessness. They are only the provisional names of selfness. To explain a certain phenomenon, someone sometimes has to be named as an example, otherwise Buddha's wisdom can not be illustrated. This is not a self in an emotional sense, or a self to which there is self-attachment, but a provisional selfness to denote the true selflessness."

Ch'an is absolute emptiness, not emptiness relative to existence. *The Heart Sutra* says that "All five skandhas are empty." The five skandhas include our physical body, spirit and mind. The five skandhas are not a true self, they are constantly changing forms. They are emptiness.

Emptiness is selflessness. *The Heart Sutra* tells us that to be released from selfness without thinking of selflessness is wisdom. Without selfness there is no one for wisdom to belong to. Hence, there is no wisdom either, nor saintliness, nor even Buddhahood for practitioners to attain. If there is the per-

ception of attainment there must be someone who attains, and that is selfness. This is why *The Heart Sutra* says "There is no wisdom or attainment." In *The Vimalakirti Sutra*, the Chapter on Observing Sentient Beings says that if there is a witness to attainment that is not attainment but arrogance.

Selflessness is not negative, but positive. *The Heart Sutra* says, "There is no ignorance and there is no ending of ignorance." and, "... No aging and death and no ending of aging and death." If there was an ending, that which ended would no longer exist in the world, and that is negative. Ignorance, aging and death are non-existent, as are the ending of ignorance, aging and death. There is no reason to fear them. Ordinary people feel that they were born and will die as a result of ignorance. Without attachment and vexations, there is no ignorance, aging or death. But those without attachment or vexations, those who are selfless, still experience the ever-changing phenomena of aging and death. Because they have no attachment to aging and death they have no fear of them. That is the attainment of those who are free from selfness.

"... No aging and death and no ending of aging and death." does not express relative emptiness. What we call "released from life and death" is to be at ease with life and death and to have no fear of them. It is to have no idea or thought of life and death. But after becoming free from life and death, a bodhisattva still accepts life and death in order to save sentient beings. This is another meaning of "... No ending of aging and death." The chapter on The Reluctance of the Bodhisattvas in *The*

Vimalakirti Sutra says that bodhisattvas should observe through selflessness and teach without impatience. That illustrates the positive nature of selflessness.

Not dwelling on emptiness or existence is absolute emptiness. *The Avatamsaka Sutra* speaks of the boundless dharma realm, the ordinary people's dharma realm and the Buddhas' realm. A dharma realm is a sphere or field which encompasses all phenomena. It is formed by the mind. Therefore,

people at different levels experience different dharma realms. "Boundless" in *The Avatamsaka Sutra* indicates absolute being, true being without boundaries, so the boundless dharma realm is absolute. The emptiness in *The Heart Sutra* is final emptiness or absolute emptiness, not relative emptiness. "Boundlessness" in *The Avatamsaka Sutra* and "emptiness" in *The Heart Sutra* mean the same thing: inconceivable emptiness.

Absolute emptiness is non-same-non-differentiated. It is not one and not two. The *Vimalakirti Sutra* repeatedly discusses non-duality, including the non-duality of being and non-being, the non-duality of cleanness and dirtiness, the non-duality of death and nirvana and the non-duality of Bodhi and vexation. These are the other names for emptiness.

When we speak of spiritual environmental protection we are talking about bringing our dharma realms in line with Ch'an principles of selflessness and emptiness. What each person experiences as his or her inner or spiritual world is the dharma realm formed by his or her mind. Ch'an recognizes ten of these realms, four experienced by holy people and six by ordinary people. These dharma realms are formed by the mind in three ways.

What we believe helps to create the realm we are in. If you believe that something is clean and pure, then it is. If you believe you can be peaceful, you



Nora Ling-yun Shih

can. When weather is hot, if we really believe it is not hot, or if our mind is on something else, we do not feel so hot. When we are suffering, if we do not think it is hard to bear, we suffer less.

In a recent issue of an American magazine, "Search for Life," there was a story about a father and son who fell into a lake in a plane crash in winter. The father soon died of exposure, but the son managed to live in the forest by the lake for 70 days, until he was finally rescued. He had only water to drink and nothing to eat. He survived by determinedly saying to himself "I am not hungry, I do not feel hungry. I am not cold, I do not feel cold." When he was rescued he weighed only 79 pounds, but he was alive! It was his belief and mental determination that saved him from death.



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A second thing which helps establish the dharma realm we experience is the purification of our physical and mental life through the Ch'an practices of meditation, recitation of the sutras, prostration and so on. If you do these practices they will lead you to see the pure land and the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. These experiences are individual, and nobody else can share them.

Making vows and trying to fulfill them also forms the dharma realm we experience. A vow is a model formed by the mind. If we want or hope to achieve something, we should try our best to change our reality through our deeds and actions. Through vows and acts we can change our present situation.

Our inner world is not separate from the outer world. A Ch'an practitioner's inner world should become pure and clean, spotless and uncontaminated. This purity is expressed in a simple and natural material life. In the practitioner's view, the outer world is not beyond his or her boundless mental capacity. A great practitioner's, or a bodhisattva's, inner world is selfless, egoless, and therefore, boundless. Her selflessness makes the outer world within her inner nature. The pure,

selfless, uncontaminated inner makes the outer world pure, selfless and uncontaminated. From the nature of cleanness and emptiness, he or she sees that the world is formless and non-abiding. A great practitioner's inner world identifies itself with the

outer, selfless and uncontaminated, formless and non-abiding. Where can he or she find a place that is not a Buddha land? Even though they recognize every place as a Buddha land, Ch'an practitioners try to spread the concepts and methods of spiritual environmental protection because there are sentient beings who still experience vexations.

Ch'an practitioners are clear and systematic in mind. Formlessness and the unity of the inner and outer world do not confuse them or make them fuzzy-minded. They can see the outer world selflessly and deal with it properly. A Ch'an practitioner with wisdom, without self-interest, can be truly objective when confronting people and situations. His or her judgment is good and his or her understanding is clear. He or she influences other people by making him or herself an example for them. That is practicing the Bodhisattva way.

When you have some experience of emptiness you are not necessarily fully relieved of vexations. However, you have enough experience to control your mind and be composed in the face of circumstances, as well a certain degree of wisdom. You know

what your shortcomings are, and will frankly admit them to others. To "know your mind," which is very important in Ch'an practice, is first of all to be aware of what your vexations are and when they occur. Vexations are usually caused by contradictions between the environment and your thoughts. In other words, things are not the way you want them to be. Vexations are like thieves. If you confront with them squarely, they leave. If we do not conceal our vexations and shortcomings from ourselves we will develop clearer, more honest, more modest and more compassionate minds. We will grow to be able to tell all the truth and to do what we should.

We use the methods of Ch'an to purify ourselves mentally and to develop our wisdom and compassion. These include meditation methods like counting the breath, recitation of Buddha's name, *hua-t'ou* practice and silent illumination, as well as prostrations, recitation, the practice of selflessness, and understanding the concept of emptiness. Changes in our behavior produce changes in our concepts, and vice-versa. These result in the purification of our minds and bodies and eventually produce selfless wisdom.

Spiritual environmental protection provides a basis for the protection of the physical environment. Environmental protection begins with the simplification and purification of our lives. Use what is necessary, but do not waste anything. We should be frugal, as well as contented with and grateful for what we have. We must safeguard our environment against contamination of any kind, for the sake of everyone. We should apply the concepts and principles of Ch'an to all of our activities.

When we eat at a monastery during retreat we do not waste a spoonful of soup or a mouthful of food. After each meal, we each clean our plate, bowl and chopsticks with water and drink the water we used. We should maintain this attitude at home as well, and avoid waste.

People in the modern world are used to throwing away whatever they do not want or do not like. While they are squandering things they bought with their own money, they are wasting resources which belong to all sentient beings. With the depletion of the earth's resources and the increase in human population, there can be no environmental protection without purifying our minds and simplifying our lives.

Ch'an practice unifies our subjective inner world with the objective outer world. Ch'an practice is not intended to produce some imaginary blissful state, nor self-comforting, nor escape from reality. We, as practitioners, must manifest in the outer world what we experience internally. We must share our practice, concepts and experiences with others and teach others to do the same. Thus we can influence others to help us accomplish the mission of spiritual environmental protection.

It is up to us to safeguard the natural environment. To accomplish this mission, it is necessary for each and every one of us to recognize the seriousness of the problem and to actually and physically do something about it. The guiding concepts and practical methods of Ch'an can help to purify of our minds and the society as a whole so that we protect the natural environment more conscientiously and effectively.



Carl Zimmerling

News from the Center:

Master Sheng-yen met with the Dalai Lama in Taiwan on March 24.

On February 22 Guo-yuan Shi presented a day of meditation instruction and practice at the Tibetan Buddhist Center of Philadelphia. He instructed participants in Ch'an methods including hua-t'ou, kung-an, silent illumination and Bodhidharma's Two Entries and Four Practices.



Master Sheng-yen and the Dalai Lama

On May 4th Master Sheng-yen was one of three guest speakers in a dialogue on "Inner Awareness and Enlightenment" sponsored by the Interfaith Council for the United Nations in Manila, in the Philippines. This was part of the International Earth Day Festival/Summit, and participants included young environmentalists from over 25 nations.

Over 300 people celebrated Buddha's Birthday at the Center on May 18. Master Jen Chun and Professor Li were special guests. Master Jen Chun lectured on *Purifying the Three Karmas of Body, Speech and Mind by the Threefold Bathing of the Buddha, Self and Sentient Beings with Three Kinds of Water* (precepts or morality, samadhi and wisdom). Excellent musical entertainment was provided by the Ch'an Center Chorus under the direction of Huo Lei, and also Lindley Hanlon, Bruce Rickenbacker, Xu Yu Yuan on Chinese bamboo flute, Betty and Dora Chou, Professor Li singing Chinese Opera, Li Lou An and Robert Jones. Thank you to all who helped make this event a success and a pleasure.

In late May Master Sheng-yen returned from his trip to Poland and Croatia, where he led retreats and lectured. Guo-gu Shi accompanied and assisted him, and also returned to the Center.

On May 24 Master Sheng-yen and about 100 members of the Center went to Carmel, New York, to attend the inauguration of the Great Buddha Hall at Chuang Yen Monastery. In the Buddha Hall is the largest Buddha image in North America, a statue of Vairocana Buddha. Over 6000 people attended the ceremony, including the Dalai Lama and eminent monks from all over the world.

The World Buddhist Sangha Youth Conference took place at Chuang Yen Monastery in May. This was a conference for monks and nuns between twenty and fifty years of age who are expected to be eminent monks in the future. Master Sheng-yen delivered a talk for the assembly on May 25, and Guo-yuan Shi attended the conference as a participant.

Upcoming Events:

Saturday Sittings: June 7, 14 and 21, from 9 A.M. to 3 P.M. Open to anyone with previous meditation experience.

Beginners' Meditation Workshop: June 21, 9 A.M. to 1 P.M. Please call to register.

Introductory One-day Retreat: Saturdays, July 12 and Sept. 6, includes instruction in the Ch'an retreat practice, Ch'an methods of practice, an informal Dharma talk, and a moderate schedule of sitting, walking, chanting and mindful work. Please call to register.

All Day Sitting: Sat. August 2, 9 A.M. to 8 P.M. Please call for more information and to register.

Three Day Retreat: Sat. August 30, 9 AM to Mon. Sept. 1, 5 PM. Please call for more information and to register.

Friday Night Ch'an Class: June 6, 13 and 20, from 7 to 9 PM, and 9 to 9:40 tea and socializing. Master Sheng-yen will speak about the stories of Ch'an masters' practice, experience and enlightenment in relation to our own lives. Please call for more information and to register.

Intermediate Meditation Class: Wednesdays, May 28 and June 11, 18 and 25, from 7 to 9 PM. Master Sheng-yen will teach many Buddhist meditation methods, from contemplation on compassion to the ocean-seal samadhi of the Hua-yen school. He will also discuss the practice-realizations of the enlightened masters and their application to daily living.

Sutra Studies Class: Fridays 7 to 9 PM beginning again in July. Please call for more information.

Taking Refuge: Sundays, June 8, 15 and 22, from 9 to 10 AM. Transmission of the Five Precepts is also available by appointment.

Recitation of Buddha's Name: Saturdays, July 19, August 16 and Sept. 20, 2:30 to 4:45 PM

Recitation of the Earthstore (Ksitigarbha) Bodhisattva Sutra in Chinese: August 23, 9:30 AM to 3:30 PM with a break for lunch. This Sutra is traditionally recited at this time of year by Chinese Buddhists to pay homage and transfer merits to the deceased.

Two Scholars' Seminars: Sept. 12 and 13, and Oct. 3 and 4. Please call to receive information.



Ongoing Activities, except during retreats:

Recitation Group: Mon. evenings from 7:30 to 9:00 P.M. Amitabha Buddha recitation in Chinese, and prostrations.

Group Meditation: Tues. evenings from 7:00 to 9:00 P.M.

Ch'an Sitting Group: Fri. 7:00 P.M. to 9:00 P.M., with a social half hour until 9:30. An evening of sitting and walking meditation, with a short talk on the application of Ch'an to daily life or the concepts and methods of Ch'an. This is also an opportunity to ask Master Sheng-yen or one of the resident monks for guidance in practice. Please call for details.

Sunday Program: Meditation, chanting, vegetarian lunch, afternoon talk and afternoon meditation. 10:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M.

First Saturday of each month: One day Ch'an retreat, 9:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M. Please call for details and to register.

Last Saturday of every other month: Beginners' Meditation Workshop. In English: 9:00 A.M. to 1:00 P.M. In Chinese 2:00 to 6:00. Please call for details and to register.

Saturday Sittings: Every Saturday, except when other meditation is scheduled, from 9 AM to 3 PM.

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